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Commentary: The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions

Authors of target article: Norenzayan, Shariff, Gervais, Willard, McNamara, Slingerland & Henrich

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Commentary Title:
Explaining the Success of Karmic Religions

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Abstract

One of the central claims of Norenzayan et al.'s article is that supernatural monitoring and inter-group competition have facilitated the rise of large-sale prosocial religions. While the authors outline in detail how social instincts that govern supernatural monitoring are honed by cultural evolution and have given rise to Big Gods, they do not provide a clear explanation for the success of karmic religions. Therefore, to test the real scope of their model, the authors need to seriously engage with questions concerning the evolution of karmic prosocial religions.

Commentary

Explaining the Success of Karmic Religions

Norenzayan et al. purport to explain the cultural success of prosocial religions in terms of their effects in sustaining large-scale cooperation. There is much to praise about this work—it is theoretically ambitious and it provides a general framework that combines the strengths of multiple theories in the cognitive science of religion. However, in its current form, the model seems limited in terms of explanatory scope. While the authors outline in detail how their theory explains the success of prosocial religions with Big Gods (i.e., religions that put emphasis on monitoring moralizing gods that punish wrongdoing and reward good deeds), they do not provide a clear explanation for the success of karmic religions (i.e., religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism that put emphasis on the idea that one's moral or immoral deeds determine one's future happiness or suffering—in particular, through cycles of reincarnation). In other words, in its current form, Norenzayan et al.'s model does not explain the fact that karmic religions have enjoyed a success that at least parallels the success of Abrahamic traditions. To incorporate karmic religions into their model, the authors must provide an account of the development and spread of karmic religions over time, and the cognitive tendencies that have been harnessed by these traditions. In this commentary, we discuss these two aspects in more detail.

The authors claim that "karmic religions are…also compatible with the prosocial religious elements in the present framework" (p.27) and to support this statement, they draw upon the observation that karmic theories of rebirth are found in large-scale societies, whereas the doctrines about rebirth in small-scale societies (e.g., of West Africa and Melanesia) tend to be "amoral" (Obeyesekere, 2002). This association, however, between karmic religions and large-scale societies is insufficient as evidence in support of their theory. Notably lacking from their account are details concerning the evolution of karmic religions over time and the compatibility of these historical trajectories with the current framework. Obvious questions that need to be addressed by the authors include the following: what is the evidence that the

emergence and spread of karmic religions were due to their effect in promoting in-group cooperation in the context of intergroup competition? Which elements of karmic religions promoted such cooperation? Further, the authors' need to discuss why their explanation is the most parsimonious as compared to other accounts that also discuss karmic traditions (e.g., Baumard & Boyer, 2013; Baumard, Hyafil, Morris, & Boyer, 2015; Watts, Greenhill, Atkinson, Bulbulia & Gray, 2015).

Assuming that the karmic component of religious traditions such as Buddhism have contributed to their success via a process of cultural group-selection, we are still left with the question of whether evolved cognitive dispositions underpin intuitions about how karma operates, and if so, whether these dispositions are similar to the dispositions related to supernatural monitoring as activated by beliefs in supernatural agents. In fact, the authors remain virtually silent on the issue of which evolved psychological mechanisms underpin karmic traditions, stating simply that in such contexts "cultural evolution may be harnessing a somewhat different psychology" (p.27). Yet only by specifying the exact nature of this different psychology can one envisage whether their model provides a good explanation for the success of karmic religions.

There are multiple possibilities, and these possible scenarios may well apply to only some of the three mainstream karmic prosocial religions (i.e., Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism) or even particular traditions within them. For instance, some karmic traditions (e.g., Jainism), may hone a different set of evolved cognitive biases that do not depend on supernatural agents as third-party monitors. It is possible that what is necessary is just the acceptance of a principle that behaviors that do not comply with norms are punished in the next life and conversely, compliance is rewarded (i.e., what goes around comes around). This relationship (between deed and outcome) does not entail a supernatural agent *per se*. If it turns out that people do not implicate supernatural monitoring in the interim between deeds and the deliverance of reward or punishment, then the authors need to explain which evolved intuitions are driving compliance in these karmic traditions, and how. For instance, it could be, as others have argued, that such intuitions arise from our evolved sense of fairness —i.e., proportionality between deeds and outcomes (Baumard & Chevallier, 2012).

There are other possibilities that may be more fitting with their model. For example, perhaps the same evolved social instincts that govern supernatural monitoring also underpin how people reason about immanent justice in some karmic traditions (e.g., Hinduism); namely, people can assume that supernatural agents (e.g., gods, spirits and other deities) monitor earthly behaviors and are inherent in the causal chain that links deeds and outcomes (punishment and reward) in the next life. Perhaps karma and supernatural monitoring are represented as independent forces, but what most influences people's behavior are ideas about supernatural agents: ultimately, people comply with norms that they believe the agents will monitor and punish. On these accounts, the success of these karmic traditions is likewise rooted in the same suite of core cognitive faculties, such as mentalizing about other agents' reasoning (theory of mind) and heightened awareness of cues that other people may be watching (e.g., drawings of eyes) and most importantly, the fear of punishment. Still, it is not clear that the beliefs in supernatural punishment in these traditions involve Big Gods or broader notions of supernatural punishment as defended by Watts et al. (2015). As the authors would acknowledge, because the aforementioned possibilities involve intuitive reasoning, they are better addressed through experimental research rather than through the study of theological representations of religions.

In sum, both historical details and experimental evidence are required to test the real scope of Norenzayan et al.'s model.

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